



## 2008/2009 Early Adopter: Challenge Center

### Executive Summary

*\*Note: This case study was formed in partnership with University of Minnesota Duluth and was written and investigated by students of the Sustainable Management class.*

The Challenge Center is a non-profit organization that serves the needs of developmentally disabled and special needs community members in the Duluth-Superior area. In 2008 the Challenge Center became an Early Adopter with Sustainable Twin Ports and received sustainability training. They recognized the possible financial and environmental benefits of joining the program, the ability to improve their business, and the opportunity to give back to the community. They have put their training to use in developing a more sustainable organization and building upon their sustainable produce-growing company, Bay Produce Company that sells tomatoes and peppers to local businesses and restaurants. Bay Produce has been attempting to become 100% organic with their produce by eliminating pesticides and reducing fertilizer and replacing it with safe organic fertilizers such as recycled coco fiber. Bay Produce has worked to increase their recycling and composting efforts, installed a geothermal system to provide heat and cool air for their greenhouses, and reduced their water usage.

#### Highlights:

<p><b>Compost and Recycling Efforts</b> Reduced waste output by using plant clippings as inputs for compost. This compost is then reused within the greenhouses.</p>	<p><b>Nutrient Recycling</b> Reduced nutrient &amp; fertilizer consumption by realizing it's also included in the recycled water allowing them to add lesser amounts.</p>	<p><b>Biological pesticide use</b> Using plant friendly insects as a chemical pesticide replacement has eliminated the use of a large amount of chemicals, while using a natural process that does not have as many unsustainable practices enforcing it.</p>
<p><b>Geothermal Energy</b> This has created large gains from energy reduction and will continue to provide financial benefits into the future.</p>	<p><b>Water Reuse/Reduction</b> Reduced water consumption by continuously recycling and reusing water from plant runoff</p>	<p><b>CO<sub>2</sub> creation</b> New CO<sub>2</sub> burners that use gas instead of liquid chemicals to produce CO<sub>2</sub>. This switch to gas has eliminated the need for liquid chemicals to be shipped each month.</p>

“Sometimes things are much too complicated and that's when expenses are experienced. You need to create a system that is simple and logical; that's where you notice the benefits of being sustainable.”

Henk Vanderbrink, Bay Produce Operations Manager



## About Sustainable Twin Ports (STP) and the Early Adopter Program

[Sustainable Twin Ports](#) is a 501c-3 non-profit dedicated to furthering economic, environmental & social sustainability in the Twin Ports and western Lake Superior region through education, networking and action. Our pilot training program, the Early Adopter Project was focused on training businesses, organizations and municipalities in environmentally, economically and socially sustainable practices. This has evolved into a yearly training program with local businesses and organizations that we call Early Adopters.

## About The Natural Step (TNS)

[The Natural Step](#) is a global not-for-profit organization with a simple mission: to promote real change toward a sustainable world. The Natural Step supports a strategic framework that is a proven, scientifically robust approach that helps organizations make strategic decisions to move toward sustainability. Sustainable Twin Ports uses the Natural Step Framework as a basis for our sustainability training.

The Natural Step bases its training on four sustainability principles;

### **Four Sustainability Principles**

#### **In a sustainable society, nature is not subject to systematically increasing...**

1. **...Concentrations of substances extracted from the Earth's crust** (*e.g., fossil fuels, dispersed metals, etc.*)
2. **...Concentrations of substances produced by society** (*e.g., dispersed pesticides, persistent chemicals from our manufacturing processes and our products, etc.*)
3. **...Degradation by physical means** (*e.g., paving wetlands; deforestation; overharvesting fish; agricultural and forestry practices that result in the loss of soil, soil ecosystems and valuable nutrients; urban sprawl; loss of diversity through monoculture; etc.*)

#### **and, in that society...**

1. **... people are not subject to conditions that systematically undermine their capacity to meet their needs** (*e.g., lack of access to education, poor wages, time pressure from our jobs or spent in traffic rather than with our families, etc.*)

# CHALLENGE CENTER

4/23/2012

Sustainability Case Study

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## **History of the Challenge Center**

The Challenge Center organization was built for individuals with special needs approximately 40 years ago. It all began in 1969 when a group of concerned parents from the Association of Retarded Children requested Catholic Charities create a day services program for mentally handicapped children and adults. The project came to fruition in 1971 when it started operating programs and activities in the former Nazareth on the Lake convent building. During the first year of operation, there were approximately 25 children and adults involved. The first residential group home was established the following year in close proximity to Nazareth on the Lake, which is now known as Alpha House. Then, in 1981, the Challenge Center was incorporated as a non-profit corporation. In 1984, the program moved to the location it resides in today, which provides the center with 20,000 square feet for programs and an additional 5,000 square feet for HRC Mental Health Center.

Bay Produce Company, a business that is part of the Challenge Center, was created in 1986 and quickly began establishing greenhouses to grow produce in. This is an important activity, because it provides employment opportunities to program participants. One of the last and significant milestones was the completion of a 16-bay greenhouse, which essentially places a one-acre greenhouse under one roof. In total, the center has approximately one and a half acres of greenhouse space.

The Challenge Center provides individualized care for people with physical and mental disabilities. There are currently about 130 program participants and 170 staff members. The

Challenge Center does not incorporate volunteers into their program. They do, however, use volunteers during the Special Olympics they sponsor annually. The majority of program participants live in facilities provided by the Challenge Center, which currently includes 10 group homes. Many program participants work for the Challenge Center by growing produce that is locally distributed. Their organization grows two things: tomatoes and peppers. The workers are involved in everything from maintaining the plants to harvesting the produce to even packaging the end product.

### **Market Scope**

The Challenge Center has a relatively small market with regards to sustainable growers of produce in the area. They are unique in the type of the business they operate, primarily because they are a non-profit organization growing produce. They hope to become completely organic in the near future, which would provide an even more niche market scope. Also, the greenhouses provide an opportunity to successfully grow produce during the winter season when other local growers cannot. Thus, they have carved out an advantageous market niche of local growing.

The Challenge Center provides programs and work opportunities for those who have mental or physical disabilities. Employees of the Challenge Center pick up residents living in the group homes and transport them to the center for daily activities and work. Participants in the program perform every work duty they possibly can. Employees of the Challenge Center only complete work duties that cannot be accomplished by program members. The program has ample space for activities and assistance to accommodate all program members.

There are few local produce growers in the area, which allows their greenhouses the opportunity to continue growing as much produce as they can sell. The produce industry is very dynamic in the sense it can constantly change with regard to prices and amounts each company ends up selling. It can be extremely weather dependent as well. However, the one and a half acres of greenhouses the Challenge Center owns helps eliminate weather issues.

### Location & Map

The Challenge Center is located at 39 N. 25th Street, East Superior, WI 54880



### Customers

Bay Produce Company distributes their products to local food markets in the Twin Ports area. Their customers are comprised of local stores in Superior, WI and Duluth, MN such as Super One Foods, a local grocery store chain. They also sell to local restaurants around the area.

They do not sell their produce directly to the public. In addition, they distribute their produce only in bulk to local markets. The distribution of the produce is solely provided by the Challenge Center, eliminating any extra costs associated with logistics. They also decided to distribute the products themselves to continue to push the sustainability factor of their business. They experience a high level of customer loyalty because they are a non-profit providing a beneficial service. Henk Vanderbrink, Operations Manager of Bay Produce Company, truly believes they grow some of the most premiere local produce available in the Twin Ports area. Their clientele has expanded, thanks in large part to free advertising and customer word-of-mouth. Their customer base has grown in recent years, due to the fact they operate a highly sustainable facility, which draws added attention and increased customers who appreciate healthily grown produce.

## **Management**

The Catholic Charities Organization founded the Challenge Center in 1969. Catholic Charities decided to open the center because parents of the organization came together and tried to get a center established for children and adults with mental retardation disabilities. They thought that this was important to the community to establish a place for these individuals. Since the Challenge Center is a non-profit and non-incorporated, no owner exists. They work as a team and try to maintain the same mentality with their personnel as they do with their sustainable practices. Henk Vanderbrink currently holds the position as Operations Manager of Bay Produce. He is in complete control of the growth and management of the produce and greenhouses. Henk went to Horticulture school in Holland, which is where he



grew up. He is an expert with regards to plants and growing and has always had a sustainability type of mindset. In addition to management, The Challenge Center has a board of directors, which is comprised of 9 members. There is also one work service director that works directly under the board of directors.

### **Purpose of Organization**

The purpose of the Challenge Center is to provide programs for those with special needs, either physical or mental. In addition, opportunities for employment for those with special needs are possible. They set out to enhance the abilities of those with developmental disabilities or special needs through the implementation of programs and activities. They make every effort to continue to provide a beneficial service to the community, as well as those in need of help or assistance.

### **Core Values**

The Challenge Center offers a strong set of core values. The employees working there consider themselves as “all in” regarding sustainable practices, as well as the people that are part of the program. They work there because they generally enjoy their job. They continue striving to achieve superior service to those with needs by providing assisted living, activity programs and employment to the community of Superior, Wisconsin. Members of the community view the Challenge Center as having a strong set of core values since they are a non-profit helping people with needs while maintaining a high level of sustainability.

The Challenge Center's mission is: "To enhance the potential of persons with developmental disabilities or special needs by providing community based services that encourage maximum development of individual abilities". Employees and volunteers practice their "mission" daily through the "all in" attitude they possess. They have employed this mission statement since the creation of the center with minimal revisions. They are pleased with the statement because it gives an overview of what and why they do things.

### **Challenge Center TNS/STP Involvement**

The Challenge Center was contacted by the Sustainable Twin Ports program in 2008 about having Bay Produce become part of the program. As other organizations in the Twin Ports started to become more sustainable, the external pressures to change the company's ways increased and the Challenge Center recognized the benefits other companies were realizing from sustainable practices. As a result, Bay Produce noticed the possible financial and environmental benefits of joining the program and decided it was a favorable decision. They felt it could improve their business, as well as give back to the community.

Becoming sustainable is more than just an external pressure for Bay Produce, it is personal for Henk (Bay Produce Manger) and the Challenge Center to be and operate sustainably. Henk is a farmer who has been farming sustainably his entire life. He received his horticulture education at a school in Holland. Applying his interests to his work is no problem for Henk. The sustainability initiative for the company started before Henk began his work at Bay Produce, but he took the sustainability to the next level when he joined the company and actively pursues further sustainable practices.

## **Funding**

The Challenge Center received very little funding to help jump-start the change program. They received minor contributions for one of the newest greenhouses at Bay Produce, as well as minimal funding for the geothermal system since it was the first one of its kind in northern Minnesota. The majority of the funding was contributed from the organization itself.

## **From the Start**

When the Challenge Center joined the program, they operated at significant losses and sustainability efforts were moderate. They engaged in recycling efforts, as well as using compost and geothermal energy. The geothermal energy provides heat in the winter and air conditioning in the summer. It's also the largest geothermal system in the entire north. It was a large project and a significant step for the area in terms of sustainability and alternative energies. Bay Produce also reuses water and nutrients that are not absorbed by the plants. The system is simple, extremely effective and it saves substantial money. The water drains from plants and is carried to a tank where it is purified by filters and ultraviolet light to be reused.

### *Sustainable Practices:*

Bay Produce has been attempting to become totally 100% organic with their produce by eliminating pesticides and reducing fertilizer and replacing it with safe organic fertilizers such as recycled coco fiber. They only use pesticides if absolutely necessary, which is very seldom since

Henk has been there. Henk has “tried & true” methods of keeping bugs out. During the process Henk also implemented gas burners to provide Co2 to save money and resources. The company has also acted sustainably by locally distributing their products and by eliminating and avoiding financial and environmental costs of transportation.

<b>Sustainable Practices</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Becoming 100% organic with produce by eliminating pesticide use.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using safe organic fertilizers such as recycled coco fibers</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gas Burners to Provide Co2 and save money.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local distribution of products to eliminate transportation cost.</li> </ul>

*Unsustainable practices:*

The Challenge Center and Bay Produce are superior role models for any company striving to attain sustainability. It was difficult to single out any arguments relative to how they could have initially improved. There are two things Bay Produce does that could be classified as unsustainable. First, the coco fiber used for fertilization is shipped from Canada, clips for tomatoes come from Holland, and these two important products come from long distances leaving significant transportation time to receive the product. If the company could find a

source somewhere in the states that produces a similar product, they could substantially save shipping expenses, buy domestically and reduce transportation pollutions. Again, we (the student authors) are not farmers and do not know if coco fibers are available domestically, but it could be something to consider. Another possible negative is the amount of daily transportation required to pick up employees. Without being unfair, we're not sure if there is a more efficient way to accomplish this, since it may be the best solution already. Possibly brainstorming on ways to reduce transportation expenses may be worthwhile to the Challenge Center, the employees, and the environment.

<b>Non-Sustainable Practices</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transportation of coco fiber from Canada.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clips for tomatoes come from Holland. Finding domestically would reduce transportation costs.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Too much daily transportation to pick up employees.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bay Produce could be better located in area that gets more sun, such as the in Duluth on the hill.</li> </ul>

**Problems Faced**

At the beginning of their journey, the non-profit organization lost 25% of their employees due to resignations. This was due, in part, to some resistance to the change being implemented at the Bay Produce Company. They then implemented and enforced a job

atmosphere that could be summed up as “get with the program or leave”. After this short period of transition they were able to establish an “all in” working environment.

### **Training Programs Implemented**

The Challenge Center is unique because their primary goal is to develop and help their mentally and physically disabled clients. With this in mind, the Bay Produce Company works diligently to become as knowledgeable as possible to successfully achieve sustainable practices. It took their organization approximately one year to become fully educated on the subject of sustainability. Their staff was educated through the TNS/STP program, with the aid of meetings and presentations. Henk and a few full-time employees implemented techniques within their greenhouses, which helped to reuse water, nutrients, reduced CO2 production costs, and overall energy use. Once Henk and his full-time staff noticed the financial benefits and realized their product quality was as good as or better than ever, they began to “buy in” to their sustainable movement and look toward continuous improvement.

### **Action Steps**

The Challenge Center committed their efforts towards reducing fertilizer, water, waste, and pesticides use, all while improving their compost, fertilizer, and water reuse. The non-profit organization was also able to install a geothermal system, which has significantly helped overall energy efficiency. Henk, the current supervisor and lead farmer, decided to use a

draining system that catches runoff water from the plants and accumulates it for reuse. This runoff also contains excess fertilizer which is the reason they are also able to reuse their fertilizer. The tomato plants being grown grow in excess of 36 feet and, thus, need to be clipped. These clippings were originally regarded as waste and thrown away. Now, they are collected and used to create compost for future use. Henk said, "Sometimes things are much too complicated and that's when expenses are experienced. You need to create a system that is simple and logical; that's where you notice the benefits of being sustainable". In addition to their reductions, they also use biological pesticides in lieu of chemical types. This means that the Bay Produce Company is primarily protected from harmful insects by protective ones. Henk and his team keep them distributed around the greenhouses, which keep a healthy growing environment for their tomatoes. This is the next step towards making the greenhouses completely organic, which is also one of the main goals going into the future.

### **Sustainable Practices Accomplished**

- *Water reuse/ reduction:* Reduced their water consumption by continuously recycling and reusing water from plant runoff.
- *Nutrient reuse/ reduction:* Reduced their nutrient/ fertilizer consumption by realizing it's also included in the recycled water allowing them to add lesser amounts.
- *Waste reuse/ reduction:* Reduced their waste output by using plant clippings as inputs for compost. This compost is then reused within the greenhouses.

- *New CO2 burners:* New CO2 burners that use gas instead of liquid chemicals to produce CO2. This switch to gas has eliminated the need for liquid chemicals to be shipped from the Minneapolis, MN area each month.
- *Biological pesticide use:* Using plant friendly insects as a chemical pesticide replacement has eliminated the use of a large amount of chemicals, while using a natural process that does not have as many unsustainable practices enforcing it.
- *Geothermal systems:* The geothermal system uses heat from the Earth's crust, and applies the laws of physics and the principles of compression in order to heat and cool the entire organization year round. This has created large gains from energy reduction and will continue to provide financial benefits into the future.

### **Effects of Implementing Sustainability**

There are a number of positive effects that have been realized by Bay Produce Company since they decided to implement their sustainability process. They have experienced a heightened level of goodwill beginning with their employees and reaching all the way to their customers. This has not only driven the company to further their journey into sustainable development, but it has also created a more positive environment. In addition, they began acquiring additional volunteers and attributed it to the notion that people want to help non-profit organizations, especially when they are not only going above and beyond in terms of sustainability, but more importantly are trying to serve as a positive and influential role model within their society.



They have received tremendous amounts of “free advertising” because people are very interested in not only their sustainability, but also the progress and triumphs they have experienced along the way. The Challenge Center/Bay Produce Company was also featured on the local news and other forms of media, proving the beneficial top line effects of establishing a sustainable process. In addition, word of mouth from employees to family and friends and from customers to others has created additional benefits for the Bay Produce Company.

The bottom line effects of the Bay Produce Company are absolutely remarkable. They have reduced the cost of fertilizer by an incredible 50% through their recycling techniques. This reduction alone results in savings of approximately \$20,000 a year. They have reduced the cost of producing CO<sub>2</sub> within their greenhouses by installing tremendously more efficient burner(s), which burns gas to produce the CO<sub>2</sub>, needed for growth and doesn't require a monthly shipment of liquid chemicals from Minneapolis. While interviewing Henk, he mentioned they are also experiencing increased revenues because the public now recognizes them as a sustainable non-profit organization. This has been a complete turnaround story financially for the Bay Produce Company. Roughly ten years ago, they were experiencing losses of up to, if not more, than \$200,000 a year. Since their sustainable movement, they have been able to successfully fight towards a year of earnings. Henk believes that this year, 2012, may be the year they finally break even or notice a profit, which is extremely impressive considering where they were only ten years prior.

### **Adoption of a “Sustainability Mission Statement”**

Currently the Challenge Center does not have a “Sustainability Mission Statement.” However, Henk hopes to create a mission statement in the near future.

### **Benefits, Motivation, and Challenges**

The Bay Produce Company continues to pave the way into the future holding their sustainability ideology closer than ever. This extreme motivation stems from the fact that their practices are actually working, and they are still producing some of the best tomatoes you can purchase locally. Henk mentioned the momentum of the company continues because they are saving money, increasing revenue, and producing better tomatoes in the process. The difficulties Henk and his team still face are primarily dependent on factors that are outside of their grasp. Such difficulties include weather, global pricing, and market competitors.

As mentioned earlier, the overall benefits of Bay Produce Company’s sustainable movement are increased revenues, decreased costs, reduction of waste, great tasting produce, and a heightened goodwill from their customers and employees. Plus, they have noticed increased media attention, giving them an overall competitive advantage over other local providers who do not use the same sustainable practices.

Despite the fact that the Bay Produce Company is experiencing a large number of benefits, challenges still arise. One challenge is they do not have an overwhelming amount of resources in terms of furthering their sustainable movement. For example, they lack some knowledge regarding sustainability and materials that can help them attain sustainable practices. The second challenge Henk mentioned is they are striving to be more sustainable in

regards to employees, and not just in regards to their food production. This ongoing challenge is created predominantly from their unique employment.

### **Challenge Center's Learning's and Role in Society**

Through their experiences, Henk and his team have realized just how beneficial sustainable practices can be. The results speak for themselves and give Henk knowledge he shares among other farmers within connected markets. They obtained a critical understanding of the process and how it isn't a change implemented overnight, but rather a continuous process of sustainable development. They must first attack the "low hanging fruit" and then strategically plan to reach for "big wins". Although this requires a substantial initial effort, the payoff is overwhelmingly worth the time and provides grounds for moving forward.

The greatest thing to come from Bay Produce Company's sustainability journey is turning a social service that was losing tremendous amounts of money annually, into a possible profit generator. The Challenge Center/Bay Produce Company serves a critical role in our society by providing care and employment for disabled individuals. With the help of their sustainable movement, they have not only bettered their community, but also provided a blueprint for integrating societal duties and the sustainable business world.

Henk expressed there is really nothing they wished they had done differently while implementing the sustainable practices. There were only a few mix-ups here and there, which are expected while implementing a sustainable practice like theirs. If they had to do it over, they probably wouldn't do anything differently. Their changes and practices worked very well and it has been a tremendous learning experience. "They didn't get to this point for no

reason.” Henk Vanderbrink. The only thing he wishes he could have done is start the program earlier.

### **Sharing Knowledge**

The Challenge Center is very proactive in sharing their knowledge regarding sustainability by offering visits and tours to students from local universities, offering local newspapers relevant information to aid in writing stories on their sustainability practices and communicating with local news stations desiring the opportunity to present feature stories on the Challenge Center. The Challenge Center also helps by providing information to local organizations, such as the Duluth Grill, about building a greenhouse. The Challenge Center is sharing what they have learned about sustainability with as many people as they can possibly reach through the multiple outlets mentioned above.

The Challenge Center is not technically an educational organization, but they do educate members of their program and employees on what they are doing to become more sustainable, through different programs and activities. A lot of education for the program members takes place in their greenhouse, where they learn how to grow tomatoes in a sustainable way that uses less water and fertilizer than previously.

The Challenge Center is sharing what they have changed with Sustainable Twin Ports and numerous other local organizations. One of the major changes they made was incorporating a geothermal heating system, which saves the organization approximately \$7,600 a year. This is significant since it is the first geothermal heating system in this area. The

geothermal heating system not only saves the Challenge Center money, it also cuts down their environmental impact.

### **Goals and Future Plans**

While the Challenge Center has already implemented many sustainable practices they endeavor to continue their outreach through various tasks. Based on the four principles, Henk believes they only can focus on the concentrations of substances extracted from the Earth's crust. The first task they hope to achieve is to be totally organic. Currently, they are almost totally organic with all materials used. One thing Henk pointed out is they would like to reduce the amount of fertilizer used, if not completely eliminate it, from their operations. This would make it considerably more difficult and challenging to successfully grow plants in a greenhouse, since they would not get correct nutrients to grow at the rapid pace required to maintain operations. The key is finding a totally organic fertilizer, but during our interview with Henk, he stated he has been unable to find one. They currently recycle fertilizer, but he believes they could improve the recycling process by monitoring the fertilizer spreader. The center would also like to focus on trying to eliminate using plastics for packaging the tomatoes. If they can utilize an alternative product, less harmful garbage will go into landfills. They would like to further extract materials, such as clay products, rather than using iron ore for products used in the greenhouses.

#### *Short-Term Goals:*

Currently Henk and the Challenge Center would like to implement more efficient ways of watering and fertilizing his plants. They already have an adequate process, but Henk believes

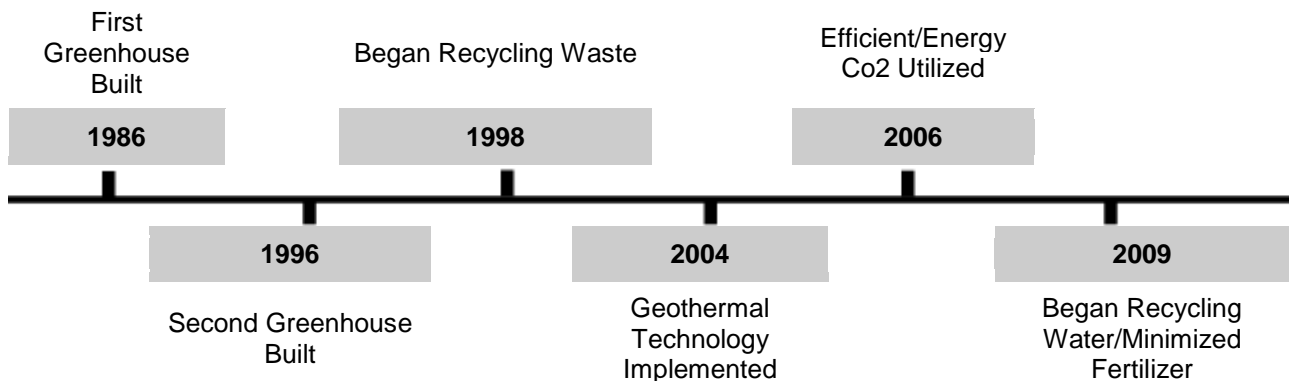
it could be improved. Henk hasn't discovered a new plan to reduce the amount of fertilizer and water being used, but it is one of his primary short-term goals.

Long-Term Goals:

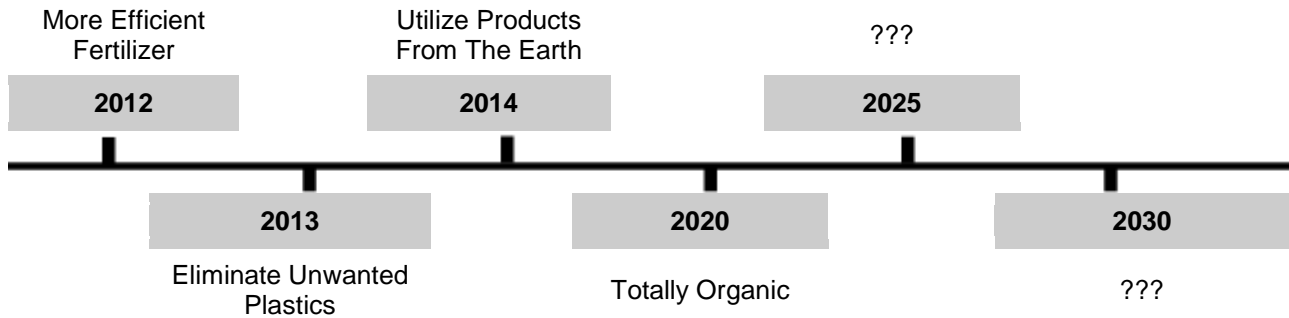
As mentioned before, the Challenge Center hopes to go completely organic. They are very close to achieving this goal and Henk believes they could change a few things to be considered totally organic. Since there is always technology advances and new and upcoming products, the Challenge Center doesn't anticipate being totally organic for a few years. Being able to completely eliminate fertilizer is one of Henk's primary focuses. But as stated previously, this probably won't happen in the near future, since he hasn't discovered a way of executing this task.

**Time line from project inception through present and into foreseeable future**

**Inception to Present:**



**Present to Future:**



While meeting with Henk, one quote that really stood out to our group, “Sustainability is not worth it if it doesn’t make sense. It must make sense from an economical perspective and it must make sense for the organization. It has worked really well for us, so we continue to practice sustainability every day.” During the meeting, Henk also shared some valuable words of wisdom to other organizations that are thinking about going down the sustainable path. He stated, “If you want to do it, don’t wait, and start right away because it is worth it in the end”. Another valuable point he mentioned is the necessity of being educated on the topic; learn everything you can so you can try to do things right the first time around. These quotes are valuable to anyone, not just organizations, but also people striving to be sustainable in their everyday habits.



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**Challenge Center's Mission** is to enhance the potential of persons with developmental disabilities or special needs by providing community based services that encourage maximum development of individual abilities.

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